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## County may scrap energy credit

### Montgomery anticipates \$518,000 savings

by Kevin James Shay | Staff Writer

While Montgomery County officials pursue recommendations recently outlined by the Green Economy Task Force, a program that advocates say has helped hundreds of businesses and residents switch to electricity generated from clean energy sources is in peril.

Just in time for Earth Day, which was celebrated Thursday.

Funding for the county's Clean Energy Rewards program, which began in 2007, has been recommended by Executive Isiah Leggett (D) to be completely gutted next fiscal year, saving the county \$518,000. The County Council is still debating the fiscal '11 operating budget.

The program provides county businesses and homeowners an incentive, reflected on their utility bills, of a half a cent per kilowatt-hour of clean energy used to switch sources. It has encouraged more than 300 businesses and 6,000 individuals to switch to electricity generated by wind, solar and other renewable energy sources, and participants have avoided contributing more than 103,000 tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, according to the county's website on the program.

Terminating such a successful program will hurt efforts to develop a greener economy, said Gary Skulnik, president of Rockville renewable energy broker and aggregator Clean Currents and a task force member.

"I can understand cutting the program somewhat in this current financial climate, but not completely cutting it to zero," Skulnik said. "The County Council has discussed perhaps putting some money into it."

The program has helped Clean Currents attract customers and grow as a company, as well as spread awareness about clean energy locally, he said. Clean Currents recently added an office in Catonsville and hopes to soon expand its reach as far as Pennsylvania, Skulnik said. The company's employee count in Montgomery County has increased to 20 from a handful when it began in 2006, and the Catonsville office is employing two more. The clean rewards program is affected by "current economic conditions," and funding "may be discontinued as of June 30, 2010," according to the program's website.

This week, Leggett and Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At-large) of Garrett Park unveiled a list of the county's environmental accomplishments since the first official Earth Day in 1970. Those included purchasing 30 percent of energy from clean sources, which officials said was among the highest rates in the nation.

Last year, the county exceeded its 2010 farmland preservation goal, with 71,500 acres now protected. With parks, the agricultural land and other easements, the county protects almost 50 percent of its land, officials said.

"Not everyone knows that we've been a national leader in protecting the environment for decades," Floreen said in a statement.

One of the major changes over the years has been the shift from people thinking that what was good for the environment was bad for business, said Bob Hoyt, director of the

county's Department of Environmental Protection, in a statement. "More times than not these days, 'tree huggers' and businesses are partners in promoting environmental quality and sustainability," he said.

Eight new businesses or organizations were certified under the county's Green Business Certification Program in response to a challenge for more certifications by Earth Day. Those include Innovative Business Interiors of Silver Spring and the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce.

The county's green task force does not plan to meet again, as it has completed its work with the recommendations, said Richard Wegman, chairman of the task force and a lawyer in the Washington, D.C., office of Garvey Schubert Barer. The county's economic development and environmental protection departments are charged with working on the implementation phase, he said.

"I hope the county will move forward as quickly as possible," Wegman said. "Mr. Leggett was quite receptive, as are department heads."

Wegman said he plans to sit down with representatives of the departments soon to see how he and others can help implement recommendations. Among the recommendations are to develop a public-private fund for green economy investments, position the county as an early adopter of smart-grid technology, develop zoning codes to further green development and expand green jobs training.